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# Erasing the Invisible Cities: Italo Calvino and the Violence of Representation

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# Erasing the Invisible Cities: Italo Calvino and the Violence of Representation

## **Abstract**

The unabashed "literariness" of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* makes it an easy target for critics who claim that "wholly literary" worlds cannot be moral ones. Alessia Ricciardi believes that Calvino's late career represents an abandonment of his earlier sense of duty as an intellectual: "Sadly," she explains "Calvino the mature postmodernist became exactly what he feared as a young man, that is to say, a solipsistic thinker removed from the exigencies of history [ ... ] his writings uphold an idea of literature as a formalist game that avoids any costly or serious 'human' association." (Ricciardi 1073-1074, emphasis mine). While it is certainly true that *Invisible Cities*—with its combinatorial, "geometric" structure - can be read as a literary game, it is important to consider the possibility that it may be a very serious game...

## Erasing the Invisible Cities: Italo Calvino and the Violence of Representation

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The unabashed “literariness” of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* makes it an easy target for critics who claim that “wholly literary” worlds cannot be moral ones. Alessia Ricciardi believes that Calvino’s late career represents an abandonment of his earlier sense of duty as an intellectual: “Sadly,” she explains “Calvino the mature postmodernist became exactly what he feared as a young man, that is to say, a solipsistic thinker removed from the exigencies of history [...] his writings uphold an idea of literature as a formalist game that avoids any costly or serious ‘human’ association.” (Ricciardi 1073-1074, emphasis mine). While it is certainly true that *Invisible Cities*—with its combinatorial, “geometric” structure—can be read as a literary game, it is important to consider the possibility that it may be a very serious game.

At stake in *Invisible Cities* is the very ethics of representation. After the so-called “crisis of representation,” in which writers lost faith in the ability of words and symbols to function as reliable vehicles of thought and experience, the act of representation forever lost its innocence. While representation is necessary to share thoughts and experience in the form of comprehensible symbols, these symbols inevitably fail to tell the whole story. Representation contains its own inherent violence in which the desired, necessary meaning (that ineffable ‘truth’ that it is the ethical writer’s duty to express) is inevitably obliterated and replaced by the physical text. The value of this text is at best only partial, and at worst expresses and reinforces the very structures of repression that it is intended to combat. It is one of the great, labyrinthine questions of postmodernity: if writing is inherently violent, is it also inherently immoral? How can the postmodern intellectual circumvent the violence of representation in order to fulfill the moral duty of literature?

The violence of representation was articulately expressed by Calvino in the retrospective 1966 introduction to his “realistic” first novel *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests*. He explains what happens when young writers wish to express their thoughts about a powerful, important experience:

...the first book instantly becomes a barrier between you and that experience, it severs the links that binds you to those facts, destroys your precious hoard of memories—a hoard in the sense that it would have become a reserve on which to draw permanently if you had not been in such a hurry to spend it, to squander it, to impose an arbitrary hierarchy on the images that you had kept stored there, to separate the privileged images, which you believed contained a genuinely poetic emotion, from the others...in short to set up in your arrogance a different memory, one that has been given another shape

instead of your whole memory with its blurred outlines and its infinite capacity for retrieval... Your memory will never again recover from this violence that you have done to it by writing your book. (Calvino, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* 28. My emphasis)

Writing “burns the treasure of memory” by imposing an artificial, subjective hierarchy—the hierarchy of language, the limitations of genre and style, or a relative idea of importance—onto the inexpressible flux of the totality of experience. Once it is emplotted—especially emplotted into the culturally-created code of meanings represented by the Saussurian langue—individual experience can never be recovered. Previous criticism—and especially critics who accuse Calvino of abandoning his duty for practical involvement as an intellectual—have not given sufficient attention to the way in which *Invisible Cities* explores the reciprocal violence of representation. Paradoxically, Calvino suggests that the best way to combat the violence of representation may be committing violence against representation.

Calvino defies the crisis of representation by exposing his own creations to an unrelenting, repeated violence by use of a method similar to Jacques Derrida's notion of writing *sous rature*. This technique involves regarding signification with a certain methodological doubt: treating all statements as provisional and proceeding in terms of simultaneous affirmations and negations. Gayatri Spivak's definition is perhaps the clearest and most helpful: “This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.)” (Spivak, xiv. *Emphasis mine*). The author creates step-by-step, provisionally, calling each judgment into question as soon as it is made, affirming and negating—erasing the footprints left in the sand. Derrida explains the process of writing in this way, “At each step I was obliged to proceed by ellipses, corrections and corrections of corrections, letting go of each concept at the very moment that I needed to use it” (Derrida, 1976, p.xviii). For the artist who places writing under erasure, the violence of representation becomes reciprocal. While the signifiers partially destroy the world that the author attempts to convey, he or she partially destroys the signifiers.

Because of his preference for lightness,[1] however, Calvino rejects the traditional typographical embodiment of erasure: UTOPIA, which achieves negation through the addition of a heavy strikethrough. In fact, the entirety of Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* can be seen as the development of a lighter method of erasure with respect to Derrida's conception of writing *sous rature*. Although Calvino speaks of five separate traits necessary for the future survival and relevancy of literature, these points are in reality inseparable and point towards a cohesive strategy of violence against representation that can be called “lightening.”

Calvino embodies his principles while expressing them in the following significance-loaded phrase: “...I dream of immense cosmologies, sagas, and epics enclosed in the dimensions of an epigram.” (Calvino, *Saggi* 673. My translation.[2]) In other words, Calvino dreams of a language that would maximize its content (signified) while minimizing its representation (signifier). Graphically, Calvino's utopian ideal could be represented by an asymptote, moving further and further away from inaccuracy towards

that never-reachable ideal of complete exactness. Because the sentence describing Calvino's "cosmological epigram" is both the best expression and the best embodiment of the Six Memos as a utopian vision of literature, it is worth dissecting Calvino's phrasing in some detail:

1) ...sogno—I dream of the possibility of this literature. I do not see it, predict it, or even ask for it—I dream it. As such, it is utopian: the fanciful and perhaps impossible ideal of my dreams. It is also a literature reached through the imagination, that most calviniano of epistemological tools.

2) ...immense cosmologie, saghe, epopee— A cosmology is perhaps the most ambitious literary form possible, which is evident in the word's etymology. Deriving from Greek for cosmos and logos, the cosmology endeavors to bring both order and discourse (both present in the idea of logos) to no less than the universe (cosmos), in both its physical and metaphysical nature. A work that is potentially larger or more important than the cosmology is simply unimaginable (although sagas and epics would follow close behind). As an adjective, 'epic' has even come to denote anything that is tremendously large and ambitious in scope. In this respect, we are reminded of the most important aspects of Calvino's trio of literary forms—their immense size and importance.

3) ...racchiuse—"Enclosed" is also a very important word in this formulation—it should be noted that Calvino does not say 'shrunk' or 'cut' or any word that would indicate any reduction of or subtraction from the cosmologies, sagas, and epics. Rather, they are enclosed in the exactness of the epigram, suggesting that there may also be an accompanying process of unpacking and reconstituting them on the other side (a process that would presumably be carried out by the reader). The words of the epigram, however, become the necessary (though inaccurate) vehicles of the dreamed-of cosmologies.

4) ...nelle dimensioni di un epigramma— The fact that these cosmologies must be enclosed within "the dimensions of an epigram" is what finally illustrates all of Calvino's Memos. It should be noted that the word 'dimensions' seemingly invokes a certain mathematical or geometric idea of size. In this respect, one can certainly think of Calvino's love of the combinatorial and his association with Raymond Queneau and the OuLiPo [Ouvroir de littérature potentielle]. The mathematical idea of 'dimension' plays a key role in invoking Calvino's highly important conception of exactness, which is equal parts visual, economic, and structural.[3]

Moreover, the epigram has always been emblematic of the force of literature to maximize its signified content while minimizing its use of signifiers, thereby expressing its content lightly, quickly, and exactly. The utopian ideal of compressing the multiplicity of a cosmology into the lightness, quickness, exactness, memorability,[4] and quickness of an epigram is precisely how literature must adapt itself to survive in the postmodern age—an era of dwindling attention spans and ever faster multimedia expression. By using compression, concision, exactness, lightness, and quickness, the cosmological-epigram approaches silence by saying as little as possible, thus committing violence against representation by minimizing the presence of the signifier. By lightening his language

asymptotically toward exactness, Calvino hopes to approximate a spirit of writing under erasure. To reiterate Spivak, the impossible, utopian ambition of the proposed cosmological-epigram would be to produce only what is necessary with as little recourse as possible to the inaccurate.

Essential to Calvino's poetics of erasure, and its inherent violence against representation, is his notion of utopia. Under the conditions of postmodernity,[5] the utopia presents itself as both a highly problematic and extremely potent form. I suggest that by writing with a certain "utopian caveat" the postmodern author can express his or her ethical values (eu-topos as 'happy-place') while simultaneously negating them (u-topos as 'no-place'). In this respect, the utopia can be conceived as the original form of expressing the ethical sous rature. Calvino attempts to use the techniques of erasure in order to express the ethical despite the postmodern crisis of representation by creating a series of invisible, incompletely-erased utopias in which he exposes his own aesthetic-historical-moral values to a sense of crisis, while never quite abandoning them.[6]

Returning to *Invisible Cities*, it would seem that the idea of the "cosmological-epigram" applies very well to Calvino's miniature urban sketches, very brief portraits that attempt to express the nature of an imaginary city. In this respect, they are probably best imagined as "mini-utopias," or even the cosmological epigrams of various imaginary, utopian universes. In 1973, just after the publication of *Invisible Cities*, Calvino wrote an essay about the French utopist Charles Fourier that contained a section entitled "L'Utopia pulviscolare" in which he describes his "Utopia of Fine Dust":

"Utopia has no consistency. You may participate in the spirit of it, believe in it, but other than on the page it does not come with you into the world, and you yourself do not manage to follow it up. Once I have shut the book, Fourier does not follow me, and I have to go back and browse to find him there, to admire him in all his clarity and obstinacy... The utopia I am looking for today is less solid than gaseous: it is a utopia of fine dust, corpuscular, and in suspension." (Calvino, *The Uses of Literature* 254-255)

The image fits perfectly; it is one of supreme lightness—a gaseous utopia of fine dust. We can imagine a utopia incompletely erased to its exact essence, until it could float lightly on the breeze—its signifiers no more than pixie dust sprinkled on the reader's imagination.

Although the violence enacted against representation does not stop the violence inherent in representation, Calvino's technique of erasure represents an important "defiance of the labyrinth." If it is true that the labyrinth cannot be "escaped,"—that there is no way to represent or perceive the world without the violence and distortion of relativity and partiality—then the proper attitude of the artist is one of defiance rather than surrender:

What literature can do is to define the best attitude [atteggiamento] that one can take in order to find the way out of the labyrinth, even if escaping the labyrinth will only lead to another labyrinth. It is the defiance of the labyrinth that we want to save, it is a literature

of the defiance of the labyrinth that we want to clarify and distinguish from the literature of the surrender to the labyrinth.[7](Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 96. My translation.)

Calvino's final words in this 1962 essay "La sfida al labirinto" ("Defiance of the Labyrinth") are strikingly similar to those used by Gerald Graff in 1979's *Literature Against Itself*: "The critical problem... is to discriminate between anti-realistic works that provide some true understanding of non-reality and those who are merely symptoms of it" (Graff 12). To write as though representation were unproblematic—to continue, in other words to write a realist, didactic novel—would be to deny the labyrinth. To write as though representing the world were impossible—to think of literature as a solipsistic formalist game—would be to surrender to the labyrinth. The morality of *Invisible Cities* is best understood in the way that it defies the epistemological, representational labyrinth without denying it by proposing a utopian epistemological "way-out."

Epistemology and representation are inseparable in *Invisible Cities*, which consistently demonstrates that representation—with all its inherent violence—is humanity's primary "way of knowing" the world. The violence of representation is not only present in the writer's pen, but also in the mind's eye of the observer. Representation is not only a structure of communication, but inevitably—and perhaps regrettably—a structure of perception. "To see a city," Calvino explains, "it is not enough to keep your eyes open. You must first discard everything that prevents you from seeing it—all your inherited ideas and preconceived images" (Marabini 184. My translation). Of course, the postmodernists must admit that perceiving the unmediated by the invisible structures of the self is impossible. Unmediated perception is the "utopian" ideal of Calvino's text: always recognized as both ideal and impossible. In fact, *Invisible Cities* is nothing if not a catalogue of obstacles blocking unmediated perception of the world, each city existing as a metaphor for the "invisibility" of experience—the way human beings erase the world around them and replace the world with symbols, simulacra, and Lacanian ideal selves. Graphically, Calvino's utopian epistemological system is once again best represented by an asymptote, moving further and further away from everything that mediates perception (which should be violently destroyed) always approaching that never-reachable ideal of unmediated perception.

The city of Phyllis is perhaps the best expression of the way that the unmediated world of experience is replaced by a "represented" world. The first paragraph describing Phyllis illustrates a utopian, unmediated perception of the city:

At every point the city offers surprises to your view: a caper bush jutting from the fortress' walls, the statues of three queens on corbels, an onion dome with three smaller onions threaded on the spire. "Happy the man who has Phyllis before his eyes each day and who never ceases seeing the things it contains," you cry, with regret at having to leave the city when you can barely graze it with your glance. (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 90-91. My emphasis)

In the first paragraph, Phyllis is seen for the first time, almost through the eyes of a child. Thus, it is to a certain extent, "unmediated." It is undeniably "open" and full of

possibilities. The second paragraph describing the city of Phyllis is remarkably different, describing a much more “closed” city viewed by the eyes of someone who has lived in the city for a considerable period of time:

But it so happens that, instead, you must stay in Phyllis and spend the rest of your days there. Soon the city fades before your eyes, the rose windows are expunged, the statues on the corbels, the domes. Like all of Phyllis’s inhabitants, you follow zigzag lines from one street to another, you distinguish the patches of sunlight from the patches of shade, a door here, a stairway there, a bench where you can put down your basket, a hole where your foot stumbles if you are not careful. All the rest of the city is invisible. Phyllis is a space in which routes are drawn between points suspended in the void: the shortest way to reach that certain merchant’s tent, avoiding that certain creditor’s window. Your footsteps follow not what is outside the eyes, but what is within, buried, erased. If, of two arcades, one continues to seem more joyous, it is because thirty years ago a girl went by there, with broad, embroidered sleeves, or else it is only because that arcade catches the light at a certain hour like that other arcade, you cannot recall where. (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 90-91. My emphasis).

The second paragraph narrates the violence committed against the real city of Phyllis by its long-time inhabitants. It is replaced, covered, and erased by an interior, “represented” city—a city of words, signs, stories, and memories. Rather than describing the physical city, these eyes transform the city into a sign of something absent. Or rather, the city is inevitably covered by absent traces of desire, or history, or expectation. This is most clearly seen in the example of the arcade that “continues to seem more joyous” because it is marked by the invisible traces of a representation of history—the absent girl with embroidered sleeves—or the invisible traces of its similarity to another absent arcade buried deep inside the memory. The city outside the eyes—the city beyond the self—is invisible. Only the city inside the self can really be perceived; or rather, the only city that is perceived is the “represented” city inside the self.

The city is perceived not “visually” (immediately), but “linguistically”—as the sign of an absent city. The self-consciously “linguistic” nature of this city is rendered explicit in the final paragraph describing Phyllis: “Millions of eyes look up at windows, bridges, capers, and they might be scanning a blank page. Many are the cities like Phyllis, which elude the gaze of all, except the man who catches them by surprise” (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 90-91). Here, in typical Calvino fashion, the link with reading and writing is made explicit. Rather than perceiving the ‘real’ city, these eyes scan its features as though it were a blank page. The blankness of this page is quite important. In addition to suggesting the invisibility of experience, the blank page also invokes the idea of writing. In addition to “reading” the city linguistically as a sign of things that are absent, the city is also portrayed as a blank page onto which these eyes project their interior selves, thus writing the world to a greater extent than they read it.

The linguistic metaphor—in which the real Phyllis becomes merely a sign of the absent, “represented” Phyllis—is a common phenomenon in *Invisible Cities*. According to Teresa de Lauretis, “...all of Marco Polo’s cities are metaphors of absence” (De Lauretis



“Semiotic Models” 23). The city most exemplary of its existence as absence is the first of Calvino’s “Cities and Signs,” Tamara:

Finally the journey leads to the city of Tamara. You penetrate it along streets thick with signboards jutting from the walls. The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things: pincers point out the tooth-drawer’s house; a tankard, the tavern; halberds, the barracks; scales, the grocer’s. Statues and shields depict lions, dolphins, towers, stars: a sign that something— who knows what?— has as its sign a lion or a dolphin or a tower or a star...If a building has no signboard or figure, its very form and the position it occupies in the city’s order suffice to indicate its function: the palace, the prison, the mint, the Pythagorean school, the brothel. The wares, too, which the vendors display on their stalls are valuable not in themselves but as signs of other things: the embroidered headband stands for elegance; the gilded palanquin, power...However the city may really be, beneath this thick coating of signs, whatever it may contain or conceal, you leave Tamara without having discovered it. (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 13-14. My emphasis)

In Tamara, travelers have the same experience as the long-time inhabitant of Phyllis, they are unable to see the city outside of their eyes. Or rather, the city that is “present” outside the eyes serves only as a sign pointing to the absent “represented” world within the self. As such, Tamara is a vivid portrait of the nature of the sign. According to Spivak, the sign is a peculiar being made entirely of absence: “Such is the strange ‘being’ of the sign: half of it always ‘not there’ and the other half always ‘not that.’ The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent” (Spivak xvii). Calvino’s city stands as a metaphor for precisely this kind of semiotic absence, the “present” city pointing towards that which is “not there” although the city is undeniably “not that”—it is undeniably not the absent thing toward which it perpetually points. By representing the city to themselves, travelers commit violence against their experience by erasing the present city in order to transform it into an absent one.

There is certainly a strain of pessimism in the *Invisible Cities*—and perhaps it is the dominant strain of the book— that believes that the perception of the “real” world beyond the self to be an impossible, utopian “no-place.” In the above description of Tamara, there is a sense that the traveler is unable to perceive the city as a presence—that perhaps there is ultimately no way for perception to access the mythical “present” being of a city. It may be the case that the semiotic obliteration of the present city is simply an unavoidable structure of human perception. Perhaps the world is not a work that invites a free, open interpretation but rather one that dictates the conclusions of its observers.

Your gaze scans the streets as if they were written pages: the city says everything you must think, makes you repeat her discourse, and while you believe you are visiting Tamara you are only recording the names with which she defines herself and all her parts...(Invisible Cities 13-14. Emphasis mine)

In this passage, Calvino characterizes the city itself as the active agent in its own semiotic obfuscation and destruction. In other words, it is not the traveler who acts as writer of the

city's discourse—projecting his own interior world onto the blank slate of the city as did the long-time inhabitants of Phyllis— but the city itself that authors its own discourse, forcing the traveler to perceive it linguistically as the sign of an absent city. If the first paragraph of Phyllis contains an optimistic view of the world as an open work, this sense of optimism is absent from Tamara. Another of Calvino's "Cities and Signs," Olivia contains Calvino's quickest expression of this pessimism: "Falsehood is never in words; it is in things" (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 62). Calvino constantly acknowledges the possibility that his epistemological utopia of perception unmediated by representation is indeed a "no-place," that perhaps *la menzogna* of misperception originates not in individual perceptions, but in the world itself which simply cannot be perceived correctly or objectively. Perhaps the epistemological traveler yearns forever to the unreachable asymptote of "true perception" which is itself merely a figment of his imagination.

Representation, however, is always portrayed as a violent force that closes the openness of experience. Another way in which Calvino's cities erase themselves is by alternating "open" and "closed" cities—creating a *mise-en-abyme* of open cities and closed cities in order to form a composite picture which is neither. An excellent example of an open city which can at any point collapse into a closed city is Chloe:

In Chloe, a great city, the people who move through the streets are all strangers. At each encounter, they imagine a thousand things about one another; meetings which could take place between them, conversations, surprises, caresses, bites. But no one greets anyone; eyes lock for a second, then dart away, seeking other eyes, never stopping. A girl comes along, twirling a parasol on her shoulder, and twirling slightly also her rounded hips. A woman in black comes along, showing her full age, her eyes restless beneath her veil, her lips trembling. A tattooed giant comes along; a young man with white hair; a female dwarf; two girls, twins, dressed in coral. Something runs among them, an exchange of glances like lines that connect one figure with another and draw arrows, stars, triangles, until all combinations are used up in a moment, and other characters come on to the scene: a blind man with a cheetah on a leash, a courtesan with an ostrich-plume fan, an ephebe, a Fat Woman. And thus, when some people happen to find themselves together, taking shelter from the rain under an arcade, or crowding beneath an awning of the bazaar, or stopping to listen to the band in the square, meetings, seductions, copulations, orgies are consummated among them without a word exchanged, without a finger touching anything, almost without an eye raised. A voluptuous vibration constantly stirs Chloe, the most chaste of cities. (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 51-52. My emphasis)

Once again, Chloe is remarkable for its openness. A metaphor drawn from the language of quantum mechanics seems particularly appropriate in describing its paradoxical openness.[8] Chloe exists as a superposition of all possible Chloes, but only while the wavefunction remains uncollapsed. In other words, in order to preserve its remarkable openness, Chloe cannot make the jump from the possible to the represented, it certainly cannot transform itself into discourse by "exchanging words." If dreams are given any kind of substance, the wavefunction is collapsed and Chloe becomes a closed city—its infinite possibilities are collapsed into a single symbol. As will be understood in greater detail when we arrive at our discussion of linguistic metonymy, it is highly significant

that Calvino uses words associated with speech—“una parola” and “una storia”—to describe the collapse of the possible Chloe into a closed model:

If men and women began to live their ephemeral dreams, every phantom would become a person with whom to begin a story of pursuits, pretenses, misunderstandings, clashes, oppressions, and the carousel of fantasies would stop. (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 51-52. Emphasis mine)

Although something is “lost” in the transformation of Chloe into a closed city, something is also gained. Although representation is violent, it is also necessary. Perhaps only the represented Chloe possesses the solidity that would enable its ‘realization’ or “communication.”

Issuing from the same national tradition as Luigi Pirandello, Calvino is constantly aware of the tension created by attempting to give form to the ineffable, insubstantial flux of *vita* via representation. To return to the key words of erasure, the problem is that language is inaccurate in the task of describing the chimerical/asymptotical “Reality.” It is also, however, necessary to communicate any sense of reality (or to convey any understanding of non-reality). The first of his “Cities and Names,” Aglaura, is a beautiful exploration of this problem, and perfectly captures Calvino’s highly ambivalent relationship with representation:

In this sense, nothing said of Aglaura is true, and yet these accounts create a solid and compact image of a city, whereas the haphazard opinions which might be inferred from living there have less substance. This is the result: the city that they speak of has much of what is needed to exist, whereas the city that exists on its site, exists less... Therefore, the inhabitants still believe they live in an Aglaura which grows only with the name Aglaura and they do not notice the Aglaura that grows on the ground. And even I, who would like to keep the two cities distinct in my memory, can speak only of the one, because the recollection of the other, in the lack of words to fix it, has been lost. (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 67-68 Emphasis mine)

Here Calvino draws a strict distinction between the city of Aglaura and its discourse. Its discourse—despite its inaccuracy—has substance; it can communicate a solid idea of the city of Aglaura. It is able to endure. The city itself, however—or rather the image of the city gathered by experience rather than discourse—is unsubstantial, incommunicable, and utterly unable to endure: lacking the words to fix it, it fades away like Ariosto’s castle of Atlante. It seems that the Calvino of *Invisible Cities* has become even more pessimistic with respect to representation than the Calvino of the introduction to *The Path to the Spiders’ Nests*. In the latter, he claimed that experience “would have become a reserve on which to draw permanently” if it had not been squandered by the writing of the book. Here the “experience” of Aglaura does not endure as a reserve, but fades away because it has not been emplotted via representation. Either way, the “city of experience” simply cannot be made to endure without the violent distortion involved in its transformation into discourse.

The long-time inhabitants of Aglaura do not realize that they conceive of their city as its discourse rather than as its essence, breaking one of Polo's cardinal rules: "No one, wise Kublai, knows better than you that the city must never be confused with the words that describe it." (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 62). A city's discourse—although perhaps necessary to make a city substantial, communicable, and durable—is also precisely the space that is controlled by those who "invent" the city, making it inevitably inaccurate as it is unavoidably linked to relationships of power. A city's discourse is subject to the relative and potentially dangerous cultural and historical positioning of its "authors," who may use Orientalist strategies to invent their own image of the city—yet another way in which representation carries overtones of violence.

Calvino foregrounds the extraordinary "positioning" (with its overtones of unreliability) by making the voice of his cities none other than Marco Polo—a pair of Western, Orientalist eyes describing the cities of the east (Not to mention a representative of the male gaze that defines the exclusive female cities). Despite the extent, however, that Marco Polo seems to embody the unreliable, subjective, "culturally positioned" gaze per eccellenza, he must also be identified with Calvino, who is also a Western, Italian male and a viaggiatore in the empire of the imagination. If we question Marco Polo's authority to present an impartial description of his cities, we must also question Calvino's—or any writer's—authority as moralist and "truth-teller." Calvino has, however, anticipated our objection by placing Marco Polo as the voice that erases the universal validity of his stories as he tells them.

Marco Polo, as the reader learns, conceives of any city not on its own terms (its asymptotical/chimerical non-differential reality) but in terms of its relationship to his native Venice. And yet only a city's discourse is solid, durable, and communicable. Once again we arrive at the inescapable impasse of postmodernity—representation is both inaccurate and necessary, and so the author must either refuse to create a discourse (surrender to the labyrinth) or constantly acknowledge his discourse as provisory and subjective (defy the labyrinth). The original fear of semiotic obliteration—"burning the treasure of memory"—that Calvino expressed in his introduction to *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* is repeated almost exactly by Marco Polo in his description of Venice:

"Memory's images, once they have been fixed in words, are erased," Polo said. "Perhaps I am afraid of losing Venice all at once, if I speak of it. Or perhaps, speaking of other cities, I have already lost it, little by little." (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 87)

When transformed into words, memory's images are erased. Representation, viewed as necessary to prevent the disappearance of cities like the Aglaura-that-grows-on-the-ground, is also revealed to be a force that erases cities...giving them substance, yes, but a substance that destroys and replaces their real essence. It is ultimately a catch-22. If it is represented, a city is obliterated and replaced metonymically by its discourse. If it remains unrepresented, it fades away, lacking the words to fix it. Either way the 'real' city of experience is invisible.

In addition to being the center of novel's discussion of linguistic metonymy and loss, the novel's famous passage on Venice is also the final, most complete admission of Polo's ineluctable cultural positioning that prevents him from perceiving reality without violence:

And Polo said: "Each time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice."

"When I ask you about other cities, I want to hear about them. And about Venice, when I ask you about Venice."

"To distinguish other cities' qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains *implicit*. For me it is Venice...(Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 86-87. Emphasis mine).

Here, Marco Polo affirms the widely-accepted idea of the differential nature of meaning production, but simultaneously negates the possibility of perceiving the world from a universal, "innocent" perspective. Polo understands other cities only to the extent that they are different from Venice. In order to explain a new city to himself, Polo violently forces it into a relationship with Venice—thus using "Orientalist" strategies of repetition and difference[9] in order to invent a comprehensible, substantial image of the city. In order to speak about any city, Marco must depart from a point a reference, a certain point of origin. Marco Polo is unable to see the world, unable to assign value to things except in reference to a concept of home: a first, implicit city. He is unable to speak of elsewhere except by departing from a notion of "here" as the non-elsewhere. In order for meaning to be determined differentially, there must be some idea of first, "original" term—here embodied by Polo's hometown—which is emblematic of his own particular culturally and historically created subjectivity. Despite his travels, Marco Polo's eyes will remain ineluctably Venetian. As Marco Polo gives form to the other cities, his conception of Venice changes; it begins to acquire a shape and a substance through difference, and perhaps he begins to lose the real city little by little even without speaking of Venice directly.

In tracing the textual techniques that Calvino uses to introduce a sense of lightness to his cities, his pessimism has become increasingly apparent. Calvino the mature postmodernist has begun to worry about the possibility of expressing or even accessing any reality that exists beyond the self. Rather than constituting an abandonment of the artist's responsibility to engage in the historical exigencies of his time, *Invisible Cities* is an exploration of the difficulty of writing morally in the contemporary age. Artists can no longer write as they have written in the past, but must find a new way to express the ethical which is cognizant of the violence of any representation. And yet, they must not surrender to the labyrinth by claiming that linguistic relativity and inaccuracy renders the world unknowable. The artist, and indeed the reader, can and must continue to seek an understanding of non-reality, proceeding towards a recreation of value in the world through negation. In a brilliant stylistic move, Calvino postpones his only clearly didactic words for the novel's closing passage. Leaving aside all that has been said about the impossibility of perceiving and representing the world, it must be done anyway:

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. (Calvino, *Invisible Cities* 165. My emphasis.)

It is a brilliant restatement of Eugenio Montale's expression of the artist in the midst of the inferno of non-reality: "This, today, is all that we can tell you:/ what we are not, what we do not want" (Montale 39). How exactly can we challenge the labyrinth? The strategy proposed is essentially a postmodern strategy of bricolage with a Modernist objective of restoring hierarchies of value to the chaotic inferno of the living. If we can no longer say what is the perfect city, perhaps we can at least identify which cities are not hell on earth. "Make them endure" invokes the notion that representation—despite its violence—is necessary. Value must be represented; it must be supported and communicated even if the machinery of representation is shabby and inaccurate. And finally—and most importantly—"give them space." Openness thus ends the novel as perhaps the most significant of Calvino's values. If it is ultimately impossible (and perhaps not even ultimately desirable) to fully escape one's cultural position, perhaps it is possible to at least not be "closed" by preconceived notions and inherited ideas.

[1] The key words of Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* are written in italics when I intend them to be understood as invoking their meaning as explained in that text by Calvino, rather than the traditional meanings of these words.

[2] Here I use my own translation because I feel the original *racchiuse* differs importantly from Calvino's translation because it does not involve an idea of subtraction or reduction but rather compression: "...I dream of immense cosmologies, sagas, and epics all reduced to the dimensions of an epigram." (Calvino, *Six Memos*... 51)

[3] Exactness means for me above all three things:

a well-defined and well-calculated structure of the work.

The evocation of clear, incisive, memorable visual images; in Italian we have an adjective that doesn't exist in English: "icastico" from the Greek *είχαστικός*;

A language as precise as possible both in choice of words and in expression of the subtleties of thought and imagination." (Calvino, *Six Memos*... 55-56)

[4] While few epigrams can be said to possess visibility, they certainly possess the aspect of memorability which is so important for Calvino's idea of visibility.

[5] Although defining postmodernism is very tricky, perhaps its most widely accepted characteristic is its skepticism toward the idea of the "grand-narratives," toward any and

all totalizing stories meant to explain the world— i.e. Marxism, Christianity, even secular humanism.

[6] By “his own aesthetic-historical-moral values” we might understand something like Calvino’s conception of *bellezza*: “La creazione d’una bellezza altra e l’imposizione della bellezza alla realtà questa (Uso «bellezza» come un termine comprensivo di valori estetico-storico-morali, come avrei potuto anche dire «libertà»)” (Calvino, *Una pietra sopra* 88. Italics and parentheses textual). This *bellezza*, however, is never presented as unproblematic, but rather acknowledged as subject to the fragmentation of the self that perceives it. “Fundamentally grounded in the tradition of the Enlightenment,” Kerstin Pilz explains, “the body of Calvino’s prose fictions represents an ongoing reassessment of his intellectual heritage” (Pilz 1). “Reassessment,” however, does not seem quite a strong enough word, as it would seem rather that Calvino exposes his values to a sense of crisis, while never quite abandoning them.

[7] I use my own translation here because I am unaware of a more official English translation of this essay, which does not appear in Calvino’s best-known English language essay-volumes *The Uses of Literature* or *Why Read the Classics?*

[8] In my treatment of *Chloe*, I am borrowing from the language of and concepts of quantum mechanics, specifically the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics. I will leave its explanation to the college physics text book that I originally learned it from:

In the Copenhagen interpretation...Until a measurement is performed, [a] variable literally has no value, but the wave function represents a superposition of states, the combination of all possible outcomes for a measurement of that variable. Only when an interaction occurs that demands a particular value for some quantity—for example, a measurement is performed—does the observed variable take on a specific value, that which is measured. This rather odd phenomenon is called collapse of the wavefunction. The act of observing causes the wavefunction to assume a state that was previously only a potentiality. (Hawley and Holcomb 444)

[9] On this point, see Cristina Della Coletta’s article “‘L’Oriente tra ripetizione e differenza nelle ‘Città invisibili’ di Italo Calvino.” *Studi Novecenteschi: Rivista Semestrale di Storia della Letteratura Italiana Contemporanea*, 24:54 (1997 Dec), pp. 411-31.

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## **Bio**





[John Welsh](#) is a native of South Bend, Indiana. He holds a B.A. from the University of Notre Dame and an M.A. in Italian literature from the University of Virginia, where he graduated with distinction and was honored as an outstanding graduate TA. He is interested in 19th and 20th century Italian literature, translation, and cultural studies. In his spare time, John is an amateur folk musician, songwriter, and Bob Dylan enthusiast.